

Western Front

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Summary

The Western Front, a 400-plus mile stretch of land weaving through France and Belgium from the Swiss border to the North Sea, was the decisive front during the First World War. Whichever side won there – either the Central Powers or the Entente – would be able to claim victory for their respective alliance. Despite the global nature of the conflict, much of the world remembers the First World War through the lens of the Western Front, in large part thanks to the success of Erich Maria Remarque’s classic, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. This article looks at the war on the Western Front from 1914-1918, its major events, battles, and strategies.

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Introduction

In many ways the war on the Western Front began as a fundamentally Franco-German conflict, and one with deep historical roots. The region had been of critical importance for French security for centuries. In the 1600s, [Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban \(1633-1707\)](#) famously sought to design and build an interlinking series of [forts](#) (which he called the “*pré carré*”) to shelter [France’s](#) eastern border from attacks that might come through Central Europe. There is a *longue durée* concept of fortified defence running from Vauban through to the great forts that existed in 1914 (Verdun, Belfort, Toul) and the later Maginot Line.

There is a similar continuity running across Franco-German conflicts from 1870 to 1940, which helps to contextualize the war on the Western Front. In 1870-1871 a coalition of German states led by Prussia quickly defeated France's fielded forces in a matter of weeks before becoming bogged down in a lengthy "people's war" (*Volkskrieg*); something we might now call an "insurgency". The humiliation of such a resounding defeat, which led to the loss of two of France's eastern provinces ([Alsace and Lorraine](#)), coupled with the overthrow of the [French imperial government](#) and its replacement with the Third Republic left France weak and exposed. This vulnerability was contrasted against the immense financial, military and industrial strength of the united German state that arose out of the Franco-Prussian War. After 1871, French diplomacy was largely concerned with preventing another crushing defeat at the hands of its strengthened neighbour. It was this imperative that led France to sign a [defensive alliance](#) with [Russia](#) in 1895, thus setting the basic geographic parameters of the First World War twenty years before it began.

The alliance with Russia was awkward for a number of reasons. Politically, it allied Europe's most liberal state with its most autocratic. It also necessitated significant investment and financial aid for a Russian state still struggling to industrialize and modernize. Of principal importance was Russia's ability to mobilize its vast armies quickly and threaten [Germany's](#) borders in the event of war. This would ensure that Germany could not defeat its enemies one at a time, but would be forced to split its forces between two distant theatres, thus spreading its forces dangerously thin. To ensure that Russia would be able to mobilize quickly, France invested substantial sums to build new strategic [railways](#) that would better link the Russian heartland with its western border with Germany. In 1914 these new rail lines were rapidly approaching completion.

All of this put Germany in a very precarious position. Surrounded by hostile powers, Germany would very likely find itself fighting in a two-front war in the event of a general European conflict. Recognizing that it was unlikely to be able to prevail under such circumstances, Germany knew it would have to quickly overwhelm one of its enemies before turning to fight the other. Given the rapid success "German" forces enjoyed in 1870 over France and Eastern Europe's daunting geography, German strategic planners decided to array the overwhelming majority of their fielded forces against France (passing through [Belgium](#) on the way in a grand sweeping motion known as the [Schlieffen Plan](#)). The pressure to quickly defeat one enemy compelled Germany to act swiftly and decisively.

The War of Movement

The war on the Western Front began on 3 August 1914 with Germany aggressively marching into Belgium and [Luxembourg](#). (France had already mobilised, but was waiting within her

borders for Germany to make the first move through the Low Countries). The next day [Britain](#) declared war on Germany, setting the stage for the war on the Western Front. In Belgium, the Liège and Namur forts, a complex series of reinforced concrete blockhouses and retractable artillery positions, proved to be no match for the heavy Krupp and Skoda howitzers with which the German army marched to war. Despite Belgian resistance, Liège and Namur both fell within a matter of days, opening the way for German armies to invade France and to begin the execution of their so-called Schlieffen Plan. This entailed the German attempt to sweep around the French left flank, take Paris from behind, and force France to capitulate in a matter of weeks. Belgian forces continued to fight throughout the war, desperately holding on to the small corner of their national homeland that remained in Allied hands for the entirety of the conflict.

Meanwhile, France made its own offensive further south into Alsace and Lorraine, the provinces lost to Germany at the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. While there were political reasons for this thrust, it was also the only area that France could attack into without risking British support (the German breach of Belgian [neutrality](#) decidedly pushed Britain into the war on the side of France). The French offensives met uniformly with disaster. Led by incapable officers, French formations blindly groped their way forward without sufficient reconnaissance. Encounter battles favoured the more careful German forces; even when the French won local success, their abysmal command and control meant that successful advances petered out, were unsupported, and were ultimately pushed back by more organized German forces.¹ Tactically, the Germans performed extraordinarily well during this period; France lost over 300,000 [dead](#) in 1914, making it France's second-most deadly year of the war. Operationally the Germans, under [Helmuth von Moltke the Younger \(1848-1916\)](#), stretched themselves perilously thin chasing after French and British troops in headlong retreat after the initial encounter battles in August.

The German plan required a rapid, coordinated sweep that envisioned the First and Second German armies advancing rapidly along the French, British, and Belgian left flank. Covering such a vast area, however, proved to be very difficult logistically and the German armies began to drift apart. This drift was first noticed by British [reconnaissance aircraft](#) and was quickly communicated up through the command structure. The time had come for the Entente forces, which had been rapidly falling back before a seemingly unstoppable German onslaught, to stop and fight. From 5 September 1914, French and British formations fought their way into a gap between the German First and Second Armies, part of a struggle called the [Battle \(sometimes "Miracle"\) of the Marne](#).² Entente forces frantically raced into the fray; some were even shuttled to the battlefield in commandeered automobiles, the famous Parisian taxis that carried French troops forward to defend the capital. Entente and German

forces fought over nearly the entire length of the front, making the Marne one of the largest engagements of the war, as well as one of the most important. Over the next week Entente forces continued to push into the gap, threatening to split the German forces and separating [Alexander von Kluck's \(1846-1934\)](#) First Army from the rest of the German forces. The Germans had no choice but to retreat, stopping at a line behind Verdun, Soissons, and Reims. When renewed French attacks were halted by the once-more cohesive German forces, [Joseph Joffre \(1852-1931\)](#), commander-in-chief of the French army, ordered troops to move to the far left flank and try to outflank the Germans from the north.³ The effort was repulsed and countered by a German attempt to turn the French flank in turn. The so-called "Race to the Sea" saw both forces make ineffectual attempts to turn the northern flank until they found themselves at the North Sea. With no flanks left to turn, the Western Front as we think of it came into being: a solid front from the sea to the Alps, with only one way through: straight ahead.

There were a few attempts to break through this line before the winter weather set in and exhausted, overstretched units became incapable of action. Most notable was the First [Battle of Ypres](#), immortalized in the popular image of German schoolboys marching gleefully in close order to attack.⁴ The attacks were costly failures: the [infantry](#), attacking with limited [artillery](#) support, had no chance of success, even against the fragmentary trenches of November 1914. The French made a similar effort at the First Battle of Artois (16-18 December 1914). Despite a more robust artillery preparation than the Germans had been able to muster at Ypres, the French attack was an irredeemable failure. Trench networks could not be broken by hasty offensives, but rather had to be systematically neutralised by concentrated heavy artillery fire. The armies on the Western Front spent the next four years trying to coordinate ever-more complicated attacks to break trench networks of increasing depth and complexity. It was this rapid and constant innovation, rather than stodgy conservatism, that created the bloody stalemate on the Western Front.

1915: The Early Trench Battles

1915 saw a staggering number of battles on the Western Front, especially compared to 1916 when the combatants became embroiled in a pair of mammoth efforts within discrete geographical limits (the Somme and Verdun). To an extent, however, this is misleading. The Western Front was constantly simmering with low-level violence, producing daily casualties that were lumped together with losses due to disease or the environment as mere "wastage". Even the grand battles of 1916 and 1917 can only be described as such because of their geography. There were frequent lulls in combat and sometimes dozens of smaller "battles" within the larger battle ([the Somme](#) is replete with smaller "battles" that separate

engagements from the wider operation). Given the constraints of time and space, this article can only provide quick snap-shots of parts of the front; keep in mind that other parts were simultaneously active.

The French launched the first attack in [Champagne](#) on 16 February 1915. The First Battle of Champagne in many ways set the precedent (and a poor one) for the shape of offensives in 1915. The French managed an acceptable initial advance and then spent a month relentlessly hammering against a solidified German line to no avail.⁵ In all, upwards of 200,000 French soldiers were killed or wounded for a modest advance (no more than three kilometres in the most successful sectors); the Germans suffered only 80,000 casualties in defence.⁶

Undaunted, the French continued to launch and maintain such attacks throughout the year, making 1915 the deadliest year for French forces (349,000 deaths).⁷ The British, for their part, did not remain idle, but could not commit nearly as many troops as their French ally.⁸ They made a series of largely abortive efforts to support larger French battles. The Battle of Neuve Chappelle (10-13 March 1915) stands out as the only truly independent effort. The small-scale battle, whilst initially successful, eventually petered out, with British troops unable to capitalize on their initial gains. This was a long-standing problem in trench warfare: the initial “break in” was not too complicated for well-supplied troops to achieve. Doing anything with that initial break in, however, proved exceedingly difficult. The Germans suffered a similar fate the next month in their attempt to test the trenches on the Western Front.

The Germans, whose focus was overwhelmingly on the [Eastern Front](#) in 1915 (where they won a series of stunning victories over Russian forces, making the largest sustained advance of the war), instigated one battle on the Western Front in 1915. Rather than hoping that the battle would win some grand strategic victory, the Second Battle of Ypres (22 April–25 May 1915) was largely designed as a testing ground for a new [weapon](#) of war: [poison gas](#). German forces had secretly installed a series of chemical tanks across their front line trenches, and on 22 April 1915 released their deadly chlorine gas to waft over to the French and British trenches opposite them.⁹ Where the gas fell thickest the Allied lines simply melted away. French African colonial troops ([tirailleurs sénégalais](#)) fell back in disorganized panic. On their flank, Canadian troops held on doggedly for days, isolated and repeatedly attacked by German forces. Entente forces were able to recover from the momentary collapse due largely to the lack of German effort: unconvinced that the gas would be as effective as it proved, the Germans had no plan in place to exploit any possible breach in the Allied lines. The result

after a few weeks was, again, a minor territorial gain of no strategic importance for tens of thousands of casualties.

The rest of 1915 followed this pattern, with few exceptions. The French Moroccan Division and the 77th Division managed an advance of 4.5 kilometres on the opening day of the Second Battle of Artois (9 May-18 June), but this initial breakthrough could not be capitalized upon.¹⁰ The French had hoped to capture Vimy Ridge and Notre Dame de Lorette, dominating high ground north of Arras. Notre Dame de Lorette was captured by the end of the battle, but Vimy remained in German hands until April 1917, when it was finally captured by Canadian forces. The French launched attacks in the Woëvre and Les Eparges to no effect. Even the largest coordinated Allied battle since the Marne proved ineffective. On 25 September 1915 the French attacked simultaneously in the Champagne and Artois, while the British attacked in the direction of Loos using the same chlorine gas tactics the Germans had pioneered months earlier.¹¹ Despite some initial advances – especially in Champagne by the French Second Army under [Philippe Pétain \(1856-1951\)](#) – these efforts sputtered and failed to meet the Allied commanders' lofty goals. The repeated failure and excessive costs for the Entente, especially from the French attacks, shaped German strategy for the following year.

1916: The Attritional Battles

Coming to power in September 1914 after the mental collapse of his predecessor, Helmuth von Moltke, (the grand-nephew of the brilliant Prussian strategist of the same name) [Erich von Falkenhayn \(1861-1922\)](#) inherited a difficult strategic position. A natural pessimist, taciturn and secretive, he viewed Germany's strategic position with deep consternation. Fighting on two fronts against forces vastly more numerous than his own, and propping up the weak, underdeveloped allies, [Austria-Hungary](#) and the [Ottoman Empire](#) ("shackled to a corpse" as the saying goes), Falkenhayn knew that Germany was incapable of winning a prolonged war on two fronts. Germany's only hope lay in forcing at least one of its enemies to the negotiating table as quickly as possible.¹² After the dramatic success against Russia, the Eastern Front had some appeal, but Falkenhayn feared that further hammering of Russian forces into the Russian interior (which dangerously stretched German [logistics](#)) was no guarantee of victory. In the best case scenario Germany would only be worsening its logistical and strategic problems. For Falkenhayn the best hope for knocking at least one of Germany's enemies out of the war lay in the West.

Falkenhayn knew that he did not have enough forces to pummel the French into submission or to push the British back into the sea. Even if he had, the inherent strength of field fortifications meant that such an effort would be unduly costly for Germany, and perhaps lead

to nothing more than a pyrrhic victory. The staggering losses the French suffered in 1915 were well understood by German strategists. It was here that Falkenhayn placed his hopes. If he could force the French to attack with the same ferocity and lack of success as they had in 1915, the French Republic could prove incapable of bearing the burden and be forced to sue for peace.¹³ Such a peace would rob Britain of its operating bases in France and likely compel them to sue for peace in their own time (or at least remove the threat posed by the growing British army). This would free up German forces to fight Russia in Eastern Europe, where they stood to annex enormous tracks of land: the *Lebensraum* that would tantalize extremist German strategists in both world wars.¹⁴ The trick was to put German forces in a position where the French would have no choice but to attack and to continue to attack, whatever the cost. Falkenhayn deduced that the ancient fort of Verdun would be just the spot.¹⁵

Having existed in various forms since Roman times, the fort at Verdun had been France's bulwark against the "Germans" for centuries before either nation existed in its modern form. It was supposedly a national symbol that the French could not let pass into German hands (although this interpretation has become increasingly contentious). Counting on this, Falkenhayn launched his attack on 21 February 1916. This was a strategic offensive that relied on the strength of the tactical defensive. The French and German armies grappled for the next ten months in the longest land battle in history: [the Battle of Verdun](#).

Verdun, known as the "Meuse Mill" for the river next to which the battle was fought, remains emblematic of the war on the Western Front. From a German perspective the battle, at least as originally conceived, had but one purpose: to kill as many French soldiers as possible. This was attrition, conceived in its purest form. The casualties were enormous, although fewer than one might expect from such a battle. Ultimately some 300,000 soldiers from each army were killed or wounded. The battlefield conditions were barbaric. Troops were fed mechanistically into an ever-grinding machine of fire, steel, mud, and death. French troops felt that the battle was a futile waste of lives. They expressed what they felt was the obvious lack of value placed on their lives by bleating like sheep being led to the slaughter as they marched into the Verdun salient; a bone-chilling foreshadowing of the widespread mutinies that would wrack the French army in 1917.

The situation for German forces was hardly better. Whereas French forces were rapidly and aggressively rotated in and out of the front, ensuring that troops did not have to endure more than a few days at the hellish front, German units were frequently left at the front for weeks on end.¹⁶ This horrific treatment, partially a response to overstretched German logistics but also based on the belief that German troops could handle it, severely sapped German morale and fighting power. Nevertheless, the Germans very nearly pushed the French to the

breaking point. Philippe Pétain, in charge of the Battle of Verdun from 26 February 1916, demanded that a strong offensive be launched elsewhere in order to draw German forces away from his beleaguered troops.¹⁷ That battle became notorious in its own right: the Battle of the Somme.

Contrary to popular belief that the Somme was purely a reaction to Verdun, the battle had in fact been agreed upon as a joint Anglo-French battle in December 1915, months before the German attack at Verdun changed the strategic dynamic of the Allied forces.¹⁸ The Battle of the Somme was an opportunity for the rapidly expanding British army, swelled with volunteers raised in part by the efforts of the Secretary of State for War, Lord [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#) – giving them the appellation “[Kitchener’s Army](#)” – to finally commit troops to battle on a truly continental scale. Although initially planned as another French-led battle, the Battle of the Somme became the first British-led effort. This was in large part due to the fact that the French forces were worn down in the fighting around Verdun. The only problem was that the British army, and its leader, [Douglas Haig \(1861-1928\)](#), did not feel ready to attack. Worried about the hurried manner in which these “New Armies” were trained and unwilling to commit his forces to combat before they were ready, Haig ideally wanted to wait until August.¹⁹ Unfortunately, armies are forced to make war as the must, not as they would like; the attack began on 1 July 1916.

The Somme

Verdun was the longest battle on the Western Front in 1916, but the Somme was the bloodiest; it sent nearly twice as many men to their graves in half the time as at Meuse Mill. In many ways the Somme was the archetypal Western Front battle. Many of the persistent myths and [stereotypes](#) of the First World War come from the battle (or are at least attributed to it). The image of British soldiers crossing [No Man’s Land](#) at a walking pace are largely inspired by the actions of some British units on 1 July 1916. For many Britons, the war is symbolized by the Somme; it was a microcosm of the mud, blood and horror that the war is remembered for. The battle, however, was never meant to be led by the British. Its initial form, roughly sketched out at the Chantilly Conference in 1915, foresaw forty French divisions supported by twenty-five British.²⁰ As was true of the battles in 1915, it was French-led, with British support.

This version of the Battle of the Somme was quickly chewed up on the banks of the Meuse. By the time the battle actually began, the French contribution was a mere twelve divisions, and it was the British army that acted as the senior partner. This not only marked an important change in the relationship between the two allies (Britain could thereafter rightfully

demand more independence), but it was also a chance for the British army and its new commander-in-chief, Douglas Haig, to establish their reputations. General [Henry Rawlinson \(1865-1924\)](#), at the head of British Fourth Army, had tactical command of the battle. In practice, however, Haig found it difficult to avoid micro-managing him (keenly aware that his own reputation was in Rawlinson's hands).²¹

Haig and Rawlinson viewed the goals at the Somme differently. Rawlinson sought to maximize the chance of success for his largely unbloodied forces. This meant lowering the expectations for what any one attack could accomplish and relying on firepower rather than manpower to overcome stiff enemy defences.²² Haig, however, felt that this approach was too cautious.²³ He recognized the need for a dense artillery bombardment to precede any attack, but was unwilling to limit the advance to a single line of enemy trenches, as Rawlinson wanted. The reasons for this are complicated, but are in large part due to the pressures of command at the strategic level. For Rawlinson a tactical victory was "enough". If the Somme was a tactical success, if it could point to the capture of some notable town, ridge, hillock or village and was not too costly, he could justifiably consider his work to have been successful. For Haig, whose position meant tackling the often diametrically opposed demands of subordinate officers, superiors in Whitehall, and the strategic imperatives of his allies (especially France), a minor tactical success could mean a strategic or political defeat. If his allies or political masters felt he was not doing enough to further their strategic goals he could well find himself on the chopping block. This pressure often led strategic commanders to overreach the tactical capabilities of their armies. Haig's overreach in 1916 reaped the single worst day in British military history.

At 7:30 am on 1 July 1916, some 55,000 French and British troops went over the top in the initial wave of the assault across a sixteen-mile front, signalling the start of the Battle of the Somme.²⁴ Their success was variable. In the southern sector French and British troops advanced rapidly, captured their objectives, and solidified their positions at minimal cost. To the north, British formations were mown down, capturing very little and sustaining heavy casualties. With concentrated [machine gun](#) fire, effective pre-sited artillery barrages, and [barbed wire](#) emplacements that were frequently still intact, the Germans in the northern part of the battlefield easily repulsed British attacks. The persistent cultural myth of British soldiers slowly walking across No Man's Land in serried ranks only to be mown down by enemy fire are largely a faint memory of the sad reality some units faced on 1 July 1916 on the Somme.²⁵ Attacking battalions in front of Serre suffered over 50 percent casualties, an absolute catastrophe.²⁶ The [Newfoundlanders](#) lost 91 percent of their forces that day attacking Beaumont Hamel.²⁷ Secondary waves faced deadly fire before even reaching the

British front line. Forced to march over open terrain due to the communication trenches already clogged with the dead and dying, they made easy targets for German artillery and machine guns, which sometimes engaged British infantry at ranges of over half a mile. It is easy to understand why the First World War is seen as futile when recounting incidents like these.

By the end of the day, British forces had suffered 56,882 casualties, including 19,240 dead. Despite gains in the southern sector, the overall result fell crushingly short of the success Haig and Rawlinson had hoped for. To their south, French forces under [Ferdinand Foch \(1851-1929\)](#) and [Émile Fayolle \(1852-1928\)](#) did better, capturing all of their objectives for the day with a loss of only 1,590 casualties. The French, able to resume the attack the next day, eagerly did so. The British required time to recover physically, morally, and spiritually. Of course, the Battle of the Somme was far larger than the events of a single day. The French and British continued to attack vigorously through to December. All told the battle claimed around 1.2 million casualties, roughly 600,000 from the German army and a combined 600,000 from the Entente (roughly 400,000 British and 200,000 French).²⁸ Through this great blood-letting, the British learned hard lessons in [modern warfare](#).²⁹

The Somme set the stage for the string of impressive battlefield successes the army achieved in 1917 and 1918. [Tanks](#) were first used at Flers-Courcelette on 15 September 1916, forever changing the face of [warfare](#). French troops twice broke through the German lines and for a brief moment found themselves with no immediate obstacles between their position in the fields of Picardy and Berlin. However, these local successes – the result of a relentless, methodical, operational hammering at the German lines – led to nought. If the Allies were to beat Imperial Germany, it was going to have to happen some other way.

If we take a step back and examine the whole of 1916 on the Western Front, the picture is somewhat mixed. 1916 was by far the worst year that the Germans or British had suffered. [Germany lost](#) twice as many men on the Western Front in 1916 as it had in 1915; [Britain lost](#) several times more men than the size of the entire [British Expeditionary Force](#) in 1914.³⁰ France did markedly better, however, losing barely more than half as many casualties in 1916 as they had in 1915. Despite these high casualty rates, neither side achieved their stated strategic objectives. Falkenhayn's desire to "bleed France white"³¹ at Verdun failed. The French and Germans suffered roughly equal casualties, and French morale was not broken. On the contrary, despite the heavy pressure at Verdun, the French were able to take part in the Battle of the Somme, eventually sending more men to fight there than Britain did over the course of the battle and inflicting far more casualties on the Germans than they suffered themselves. Similarly, Joffre's stated goal of destroying the German and Austro-

Hungarian armies was not achieved. These strategic shortcomings were not without their repercussions. Haig managed to survive through to the end of the war, but both Joffre and Falkenhayn lost their jobs. Joffre was promoted to a position in which he had no real authority over French operations (the traditional way of gracefully moving a military commander out of the way). Falkenhayn, perhaps less insultingly, was given a field command again, where he conducted successful operations against [Romania](#) in 1917 and later commanded troops in Palestine in an attempt to bolster the crumbling Ottoman forces' fight against the British invading from [Egypt](#). In their places, [Robert Nivelle \(1856-1924\)](#) took over for France (Nivelle had risen to prominence after retaking Fort Douaumont in October 1916), while the team of [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#) and [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) took over for Germany.³² Their appointments shaped the fighting in crucial ways in 1917.

1917: The Year of Desperation

1917 was in many ways a desperate year for both the Allies and the Germans. Faced with continued encirclement, a biting [blockade](#) and struggling allies, German war-leaders needed to knock at least one of the Great Powers out of the war as quickly as possible to stand any chance of even a conditional, negotiated victory. Hindenburg and Ludendorff chose to continue operations in the theater of war where they had earned their fame: the Eastern Front. Russia was by far the weakest of the three major Entente powers and Germany had already pushed Russian forces deep into their own territory. Peace with Russia would free up millions of German soldiers who might be able to tip the balance in Germany's favour on the Western Front. Such an attack would require concentrated manpower from an already-overstretched German army. To help free up men for the coming offensives, Hindenburg and Ludendorff withdrew forces to the so-called Hindenburg Line (*Siegfriedstellung*) around the Noyon Salient in France in early 1917. This new line of fortifications both shortened the length of the frontage Germany had to man and was well protected by concrete bunkers and well-planned out defensive arrays. These further economised on manpower and were quite difficult for the Entente powers to break through. In the short to medium term the Hindenburg Line solved a number of important strategic and tactical issues the Germans faced in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of the Somme.

For the Allies, 1917 needed to be better than 1916. Haig wanted more than ever to have a truly independent hand in operations, and he sought to pursue independent battles in the British sector. Before 1917 British battles had been part of broader French efforts and under some level of French strategic direction. Haig got his wish (although not in the way he had hoped) thanks to Robert Nivelle, under whose stewardship the morale of the French army finally cracked. Nivelle succeeded Joffre as commander-in-chief, in large part because of his highly optimistic view of the war. He was convinced that if the French made another

successful push like they had on the Somme, the end of the war might be in sight. He chose the Chemin des Dames as the area of attack. Like Castelnau, who over-promised on the Second Battle of Champagne, Nivelle chose to operate in the south-eastern sector where there were fewer villages to hold up the presumed French advance. (This also, of course, meant that there were fewer genuine objectives to hold out before attacking troops). Nivelle eagerly elaborated on his plans to fellow generals, French politicians, and even British politicians. He announced proudly that “we have the method” (referring to his methodology for recapturing Fort Douaumont), and made no secret of his plans to attack the Germans.³³ He even went so far as to announce that if the battle was not successful in the first forty-eight hours, he would call off the attack: never again would the French be subjected to the sustained blood-letting they suffered on the Somme and the Meuse.

The attack began on 16 April 1917. French Fifth and Sixth Armies advanced against German positions, making little progress and suffering grievous casualties. Nivelle’s proud trumpeting of his own impending success had caught the German’s attention.³⁴ They had pulled their forces back to better-defended positions (which meant that much of the French attack fell into thin air) and brought in substantial reinforcements to the sector. Going back on his word, Nivelle kept pushing beyond his forty-eight-hour limit, even though it was clear that the offensive had failed. In the end, the battle lasted for nine days and cost the French 134,000 casualties: two-thirds the number of casualties that the French had lost in five months of fighting on the Somme.³⁵ April 1917 was the worst month the French had faced since November 1914.

Worse than the casualties was the deep loss of confidence that rippled through the French army. Many, despite their own experiences, had believed in Nivelle’s plan and hoped for success. The realisation that the Nivelle Offensive was yet another failure and the fear that the war might go on forever shattered the already thread-bare resolve of many French soldiers. Within days of the closing of the Nivelle Offensive, some French troops began to refuse to do their duties; in some instances officers were harassed or even shot by their men.³⁶ This was the beginning of the so-called “French Mutiny”, a period of discontent and disobedience that eventually touched 121 French infantry regiments. It shaped Entente actions on the Western Front for the rest of the year.

To call the “French Mutiny” a “mutiny” or “uprising” is, however, not accurate. In many ways it was nothing more than a worker’s strike, such as the French soldiers had been used to conducting in peacetime. The soldiers complained about the poor tactics in recent battles and refused to go over the top in badly thought-out and executed attacks (they would still, however, defend their positions if attacked by the Germans). The soldiers also, however,

used the occasion to address a range of long-term grievances, including the substandard food issued to French troops and the lack of adequate leave time to visit family (especially in comparison to their British comrades).³⁷ The failure of the Nivelle Offensive, then, was the straw that broke the camel's back. It unleashed a surge of emotion that had been growing for years thanks to a range of pre-existing grievances. Nivelle, however, did not get a chance to rectify the situation.

Nivelle was de facto replaced by Philippe Pétain as early as 29 April 1917, just as the first instances of unrest and "mutiny" were manifesting themselves. Nivelle remained commander-in-chief, but the real power lay with Pétain, who was made his chief of staff. This façade lasted less than a month. By mid-May Nivelle had officially been sacked and Pétain had taken over. Pétain had an enormous task on his hands and immediately set to work trying to quell the mutiny. He made immediate efforts to organise better food and more frequent leave for the troops.³⁸ He also cracked down on individuals believed to be "ring-leaders", partially to make an example of them, but also to try to separate the truly malfeasant from the merely discontent.³⁹ This did not, however, end the mutiny over night; it took months before the French were ready for another offensive action. Fearing what would happen if the Germans learned of the French indiscipline, the French became desperate for a British attack to ensure that the Germans were preoccupied elsewhere.

The British Army Ascendant

For the first time in the war, in 1917 Britain acted as the senior partner on the Western Front. The British launched a series of independent battles in 1917, starting with the Battle of Messines (7-14 June 1917), and ending with the Battle of Cambrai in November-December 1917. What makes these battles so interesting is not only their methodology (the British army was a much more effective force in 1917 than it had been in 1916), but also the technological ingenuity of many of the attacks. Messines Ridge, for example, saw one of the most successful mine attacks of the war. Starting in late 1915 and early 1916, the British had tunnelled a series of [mines](#) down under the German positions in and around Messines.⁴⁰ Launching their attack at 3:00 am on 7 June, the British, supported by tanks, arrayed their infantry under cover of darkness. Nineteen [mines](#) dug under the British positions were detonated from about 3:10 am on, at which point British artillery opened fire on German positions and British troops surged forward. They captured Messines quickly and suffered only moderate casualties. Tactically it was a notable success, but it still lacked the substantial strategic effect that Haig desired. He hoped to win his big strategic victory in the Ypres salient that summer.

Douglas Haig had advocated for an independent British attack in Ypres to clear the Channel ports since becoming commander-in-chief at the end of 1915. Such an attack would best suit British interests and would make it more difficult for the Germans to launch further naval raids against British shipping. (1917 saw the reintroduction of unrestricted [submarine warfare](#), which inflicted staggering losses on British shipping.) The paralysis of the French army in 1917 gave Haig the autonomy he had long sought and opened up the possibility for a large-scale offensive in the Ypres sector. This battle, the Third Battle of Ypres, would be better known as Passchendaele, named after the ultimate goal of the battle. Running for a little over three months, from 31 July–10 November, Third Ypres was the Entente's major offensive effort of 1917. The planning for the battle followed lines similar to those of the Battle of the Somme. Haig wanted an ambitious strategic victory and was willing to set distant goals for his troops to meet. Unlike the Somme, however, where the cautious and capable Rawlinson had tactical command, Third Ypres was commanded by one of Haig's close *protégées*, [Hubert Gough \(1870-1963\)](#).⁴¹

Instead of a cautious "bite-and-hold" operation like the successful Battle for Messines Ridge, Gough and Haig hoped for a stunning advance that would take advantage of the confusion they hoped to sow in the German lines with the weight of their attack. Whereas General [Herbert Plumer \(1857-1932\)](#), commanding the British Second Army, had recommended an advance of just over 1.5 kilometres, Gough's plan envisioned an advance of up to nine or ten! As had happened on the Somme, this greatly thinned the British artillery concentration, making it more difficult to effectively neutralise German defences and protect advancing infantry with a sufficient barrage. Ultimately, the battle faltered and eventually ended. Haig's forces failed to clear the Channel ports, but this was probably an illusory goal to begin with, if the recent experiences from 1916 were anything to go by. Some consolation could be found in the better casualty ratios the British achieved (British and German losses were more or less even, which was an improvement over their performance on the Somme). As with the great battles of 1916, the casualty ratios are not necessarily an absolute measurement, strategically speaking. The size of the German population meant that it could ill-afford to trade losses with the Entente one-for-one, especially with the entry of the [United States](#) into the war in April 1917, which tipped the demographic scales against Germany. The Third Ypres also kept the Germans from being able to launch an attack against a French army still recovering from the Nivelle Offensive and internal mutinies. Ultimately, it was hardly the great success Haig had desired. Many saw it as a sharp contrast to Germany's continued success on other fronts, including the capture of Riga, the breaking of the Italians at Caporetto, and the collapse of the Russian forces as revolution violently ripped through the nation.

The final notable offensive of the year occurred in Cambrai. Above all else the battle remains

synonymous with the tank. Cambrai offered the first glimpse of the possibilities tanks offered when employed *en masse* (previous uses in 1916 and during the Nivelle Offensive had largely been unremarkable for both technical and operational reasons). The results were stunning. Supported by advanced infantry and artillery tactics, the 437 tanks punched through the German lines and advanced up to eight kilometres in the most successful sectors of the attack. The advance was uneven, however, and lead units came under considerable flanking fire as they pressed home their advance (a recurring theme in attacks on the Western Front). Ultimately, the British failed to capture their main objective (Bourlon Ridge), lost over a third of their tanks on the first day alone (180 out of 437), and had their spectacular advance reversed by German counter-attacks over the proceeding days.⁴² Thus, Cambrai not only offered a glimpse of the future of armoured warfare; it also signalled loud and clear that no wonder weapon was going to win the war. Instead it would have to be won “the hard way”: through fighting and defeating the enemy at a rate they could not sustain.

1918: The Year of Decision

Utterly unbeknownst to the high command sitting on either side of the Western Front trenches, 1918 would be the last year of the First World War. Of the two sides, the Germans were more keenly aware of the seriousness of their predicament. Despite Russia's collapse after the [Bolshevik Revolution in 1917](#) and the subsequent [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#) on 3 March 1918, the Germans were still set to lose the war if it continued for much longer.⁴³ The French and British remained in the field in the millions. Worse yet, the United States had joined the war on their side earlier in April 1917. Although the Americans took a long time to enter the field, by war's end they had, on paper, an army of 4 million men: more than 1 million more than Germany had marched to war with in 1914. Ludendorff and Hindenburg, the leaders of the German armed forces (and in many ways the political masters of a German state increasingly under military control), knew that if they were going to get a favourable peace, they would have to force the Allies' hands sooner rather than later. They led one last-ditch gamble to try to win before their armies were ground out of existence by the sheer weight of the industrial, economic, and demographic superiority of their opponents.

Operation Michael, also known as the Ludendorff or [Spring Offensive](#), was launched on 21 March 1918. The brunt of the offensive fell on Portuguese and British forces stationed north and east of the old 1916 Somme battlefield. The Germans hoped to drive these troops northwards, away from the main body of the Allied forces and into the sea. Ludendorff hoped that if he could defeat the British Army, he could negotiate a peace favourable to Germany. Initially it looked as though Operation Michael might work. The Allied line crumbled under the German “hurricane” bombardment (which included prodigious amounts of poison gas) and

rapid storm troop tactics.⁴⁴ Pétain, as commander-in-chief, rushed units northward to shore up the beleaguered British, Portuguese and Belgians. At the same time, he privately told General Fayolle, commander of the Reserve Army Group of over fifty divisions, that if it looked like the Germans were going to be successful, he should fall back to Paris and leave the British to their fate.⁴⁵ Pétain became increasingly pessimistic, and began openly voicing his opinion that the war was lost. In the end the Allies were saved by strategic mistakes made by Ludendorff and by Foch's foresight and intuition.

Quickly abandoning his strategy to push the British into the sea, Ludendorff instead began to attack wherever the Allied line seemed weakest. Instead of pushing northwest, he began attacking west, and even southwards. This diffusion allowed the battered northern sectors to stabilize, making them far more resistant to future attacks. As Ludendorff continued to press on, he fought his army into a giant salient roughly pointed towards Paris. The salient was very difficult to supply, and stretched the line so that German forces had to hold much more of the line than previously, whilst also still maintaining spare troops to launch attacks.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Ludendorff had managed by far the most substantial advance made by any force on the Western Front since 1914; Allied generals and politicians had ample reason to be deeply concerned.⁴⁷ Their fear led them finally to instate a singular Allied leader to coordinate efforts – a feat that had long been sought but had always seemed unattainable as each power defiantly protected its own unique strategic interests and independence.⁴⁸ The man chosen to lead the Allies as Supreme Allied Commander was Ferdinand Foch.

Despite successfully overseeing the Battle of the Somme in 1916, Foch had largely been sidelined in 1917.⁴⁹ His methodical approach, very similar to what the British termed “bite-and-hold”, was unpopular in 1917 when Nivelle's bold promises of swift victory seemed more tantalizing. In April 1918, however, he was returned to a position of high command, indeed the highest. After frantically working to thwart German attacks for two months as Supreme Allied Commander, he finally recognised, long before anyone else, that the Germans had fought themselves into a remarkably precarious situation. The broadly south-western direction of the German advance had led them into an area without the adequate rail networks needed to keep their forces supplied and combat-worthy. By continuing to pursue weak-points in the Allied line rather than aim at specific strategic objectives, the Germans had effectively marched cross-country rather than following pre-war travel and trade networks. This problem was exacerbated by the continued French control of Reims, the major rail hub in the Champagne region. If the Germans could capture Reims, their logistical problems would be greatly reduced, and the will of the French to fight might finally be crushed.⁵⁰

Foch recognised the necessity for the Germans to attack south in the region of Reims. He decided that it was the perfect opportunity for a counter-attack to wrestle the initiative away from the Germans and finally give beleaguered Allied forces time to rest and regroup. Foch's plan called for the Allied troops in the area (French, British, American and Italian) to quietly retreat from their trenches so that the weight of the German attack would fall into thin air (in effect, doing to the Germans what had been done to the French before the Nivelle Offensive). The Germans would be allowed to advance into a salient east of Reims, thus exposing a vulnerable flank. The French would drive aggressively into this flank, forcing the Germans either to quickly retreat or to suffer enormous losses in casualties and surrender. Foch placed Tenth Army in charge of this counter-stroke, commanded by General [Charles Mangin \(1866-1925\)](#), nicknamed "the Butcher". His single-minded aggression, which had proved costly in previous engagements, was perfectly suited to leading an all-out counter-attack on the flank of the advancing German force.⁵¹

On 15 July 1918 the Germans proved Foch right by launching a major attack east of Reims that became known as the Second Battle of the Marne.⁵² Even though Foch's predictions were correct, the German attack was still fierce and threatened to break through the intentionally weakened Allied centre (Foch, intentionally or not, recreated the conditions at Marathon and Cannae in preparation for his flank attack). Pétain, as commander-in-chief of the French forces, grew so concerned that he actually ordered Mangin to scrap the counter-attack and send forces south to shore up the line.⁵³ The order was countermanded by Foch just in time and the attack was allowed to go on.⁵⁴ It was a resounding success and the Germans were driven back with heavy loss. Foch won back the initiative for the Allies and was made a Marshal of France for his success. After the Second Battle of the Marne, the Germans no longer were on the attack and seeking victory, but on the defensive, trying to stave off defeat.

The Second Battle of the Marne continued into early August (15 July–6 August). Two days after it finished the Allies launched one of their most successful operations of the war: the [Battle of Amiens](#) and the Battle of Montdidier. These battles, using sophisticated "all-arms" methodology, were so successful that they caused Ludendorff to have a serious mental breakdown (he later referred to 8 August as the "black day" of the German army, although careful examination of his writings shows that he had actually used the term to describe several different days at various points in his life).⁵⁵ These battles signalled the start of what we now call the "[Hundred Days](#)", the final three-plus months of the war in which the Allies made startling advances and eventually pushed the German army to the point where peace was their only option. The Allies were able to do this by attacking with a speed that the

Germans could not match.⁵⁶ Whereas the Allies had previously picked a single spot to attack and had continued attacking there for months at a time, the Hundred Days saw attacks lasting little more than a couple days before being moved laterally somewhere else down the line. This meant that the former German strategy of rapidly bringing in reinforcements no longer worked. Instead of shoring up their numerical inferiority by judiciously moving reserves into the battle space, the Germans were now under attack everywhere at once. The reserves could not get to a battle before the battle had ended and moved elsewhere.

Demoralised and isolated, German troops began to surrender in staggering numbers.⁵⁷

This problem was significantly worsened by the arrival of some 2 million American soldiers in France over the course of 1918. Led by General John J. Pershing (1860-1948), American forces were green and led by officers with little relevant pre-war experience. Trained by British and French advisors, they nevertheless fought the war firmly under the wing of the French army, receiving substantial support in the planning and execution of their attacks (especially regarding the use of artillery). In many ways, American forces repeated some of the tactical mistakes that Entente forces had made earlier in the war, attacking with too many men and not enough fire support. The results were predictable: high casualties and meagre gains. Despite some early growing pains, the arrival of large numbers of fresh American troops on the Western Front ensured that the sheer numerical superiority of the Allied forces would eventually prevail over Imperial Germany.

As a result, the Allies were able to capitalise on the advantages conferred by imitative tactics and relative surprise; in just over three months they rapidly wore down the German army. The Germans went from having nearly thirty fresh reserve divisions in August 1918 to fewer than four in October. Contrary to the propaganda of the National Socialists, the Western Front was won militarily, in the field. By 1918 the German army could no longer effectively defend itself. Had the [German government](#) insisted that it continue to do so, the Allies would have invaded Germany, an act that risked throwing the nation into civil war (a subdued form of which raged throughout Germany after the Great War ended).⁵⁸ In the end, the grotesque arithmetic of [attrition](#) eventually caught up with the Germans: they still had plenty of machine guns, shells, and artillery, but they no longer had the men to fire them.

Conclusion

The war on the Western Front was the decisive theatre in the First World War. Despite Germany's success [in the Balkans](#) and on the Eastern Front, it was ultimately its inability to defeat the Allied powers fighting in France and Flanders that determined the war's outcome. Throughout the war there was substantial disagreement about "how" to best fight (and

hopefully “win”) the war on the Western Front. The Entente powers vacillated between policies of slow, methodical battles that gradually pushed back the enemy, and grand, “general offensives” that sought to win major strategic victories over the course of a few days, rather than several months. The Germans also tried different, albeit similar policies of outright attrition (Verdun) and pushing for grand strategic victories in the field (the Ludendorff Offensives of 1918). Ultimately, it was a combination that proved successful: Foch’s “*bataille generale*”, a long series of short, sharp attacks up and down the front that not only won ground, but also balanced the bloody ledger of attrition in favour of the Entente. The Hundred Days proved that the Western Front could in fact be won if the right methodology and technology were used. It was a fitting, unceasing, mechanistic finale to a grand and horrible industrial war.

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Notes

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[Plumer, Herbert](#); [Gough, Hubert](#); [Rawlinson, Henry](#); [Kluck, Alexander von](#); [Vauban, Sébastien Le Prestre de](#); [Pershing, John J.](#); [Foch, Ferdinand](#); [Pétain, Philippe](#); [Nivelle, Robert Georges](#); [Mangin, Charles](#); [Kitchener, Horatio Herbert Kitchener, Earl](#); [Ludendorff, Erich](#); [Falkenhayn, Erich von](#); [Moltke, Helmuth Johannes Ludwig von](#); [Hindenburg, Paul von](#); [Haig, Douglas](#); [Joffre, Joseph Jacques Césaire](#); [Fayolle, Émile](#); [Plan, Schlieffen](#)

Key Location(s)

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Title

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Author(s)

[Jonathan Krause](#)

Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

Survey Article (Thematic)

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